Prominent ears: a Celtic perspective

EDITOR,—It seems improbable that a highly developed and richly expressive language such as Welsh should not have terms for bat ears, as suggested by J Hamish E Laing and David Gault.[1] Like the authors, I have no data on the prevalence of prominent ears in Wales, but in Welsh the word "clustiog" means large eared or long eared (like the handle(s) of a jug). All the other Celtic languages have similar words denoting big eared:

Breton	skouarnek
Cornish	scovarnak
Gaelic	cluasach
Irish	cluasach
Manx	cleayshag

Welsh also has the following compound terms:

clusthir (clustir)	long eared
clustlaes	flap eared
clustlipa	flap eared

Incidentally, all these Welsh terms have been in use since at least the 14th or 15th century.

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1 Laing JHE, Gault D. Prominent ears: a European perspective. *BMJ* 1995;311:1715. (23-30 December.)

Why do old men have big ears?

The Chinese believe that long ears predict longevity . . .

EDITOR,—Readers may be interested to know that in the Chinese art of physiognomy one longstanding belief is that long ears predict longevity. There are several possible interpretations of the observed (cross sectional) positive correlation between age and ear size in James A Heathcote's study.[1] Heathcote suggests that as we get older our ears get bigger. Another interpretation may be that big ears predict survival: men with smaller ears may die selectively at younger ages. Ear size or pattern, or both, may be a marker of some biological process related to health. Several reports have related the diagonal earlobe crease to coronary heart disease and all cause mortality.[2,3] Petrakis noted the diagonal earlobe crease in statues of Emperor Hadrian and postulated that he may have had coronary heart disease and congestive heart failure.[4] However, I don't think that I would go as far as my grandmother (one of the last generation of Chinese women with bound feet), whom I remember admonishing me in early childhood to stretch my ears daily to ensure long life.

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1 Heathcote JA. Why do old men have big ears? *BMJ* 1995;311: 1668. (23-30 December.)
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3 Elliott WJ, Karrison T. Increased all-cause and cardiac morbidity and mortality associated with the diagonal earlobe crease: a prospective cohort study. *Am J Med* 1991;91:247-54.
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. . . and that thick ears signify greater wealth

EDITOR,—James A Heathcote's cross sectional study of 206 patients, in which he measured the length of the subjects' ears, leads him to conclude that older men have larger ears.[1] This observation may confirm ancient beliefs. In particular, it is believed in Chinese culture (and also evident in Chinese literature and traditional grandmothers' tales) that studying a person's facial features may reveal a vast amount of information regarding that person's personality and may yield forecasts of prosperity, longevity, and mishaps. In this respect it is believed to be important to study the features of the forehead, eyebrows, eyes, nose, ears, lips, and teeth closely together to give an accurate forecast of the person's destiny.

The ear, in particular, is believed to predict one's prosperity and longevity. Unlike in Heathcote's study, in which the whole length of the ear was measured, the ancient Chinese believed that each part of the ear represented a different prospect. For example, the length of the earlobe denotes long life, and thickness means greater wealth. It is also said that the longer the ears the more noble the person will be. For example, kings and emperors of old China are all said to have had extremely long ears (as does the statue of Buddha). The founder of the minor Han dynasty in AD 221, Liu Bei, is also said to have had ears reaching to his shoulders and could see his ears by glancing back over his shoulders.[2]

Heathcote's study has confirmed the fascination of the Chinese art of studying facial features. One important point is that the individual facial features studied are unique (and should not be studied after artificial alteration—for example, some African tribes are unlikely to have long lives just because their earlobes have been artificially lengthened by the wearing of heavy metal earrings). Prospective studies are indicated to confirm the causal association between longevity and big ears.

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1 Heathcote JA. Why do old men have big ears? *BMJ* 1995;311: 1668. (23-30 December.)
2 Lee SM. *The Chinese art of studying the head, face and hands.* 3rd ed. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1995.

Correlation of ear length with age in Japan

EDITOR,—James A Heathcote's cross sectional study is a good example of studies that primary care physicians can carry out to answer questions that the literature does not resolve.[1] The study showed a positive relation between age and ear length, but several problems should be addressed. How large is the correlation coefficient? Do taller people have longer ears? Do elderly people of other races also have longer ears? Pelz and Stein measured external ear length and width in 1271 children and adolescents and reported that ear length increases steadily and annually but that ear width is independent of age.[2] This interesting discrepancy may be recognised in adults.

We conducted a study at four primary care clinics in Japan. Age, sex, height, and left ear length were measured in 400 consecutive Japanese patients aged 20 and older. The mean age was 65·2 (range 21-94) years, and the mean ear length was 70·1 (range 50-87) mm. The linear regression equation between age and ear length was: ear length=61·8+(0·13×age) (95% confidence interval for the regression coefficient 0·09 to 0·17), and the correlation coefficient was 0·30 (0·21 to 0·39). The linear regression equation between height and ear length was: ear length (mm)=51·2+(0·12×height (cm)) (95% confidence interval for regression coefficient 0·07 to 0·18), and the correlation coefficient was 0·21 (0·11 to 0·32). Because ear length was positively correlated with height we divided ear length by height. The linear regression equation between

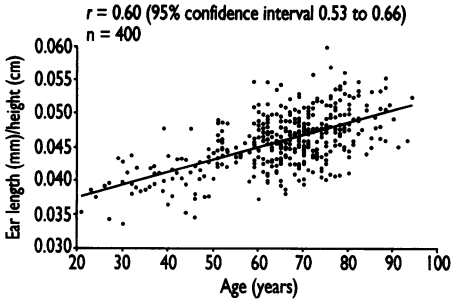

Fig 1—*Scatter plot of ear length divided by height against age*

age and ear length divided by height was: ear length/height=0·034+(0·00019×age) (95% confidence interval for the regression coefficient 0·00016 to 0·00021), and the correlation coefficient was 0·60 (0·53 to 0·66), which was greater than the correlation coefficient between age and ear length (fig 1).

We conclude that ear length correlates significantly with age, as Heathcote showed, in Japanese people and that ear length corrected for height shows greater correlation with age.

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1 Heathcote JA. Why do old men have big ears? *BMJ* 1995;311: 1668. (23-30 December.)
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Lifelong follow up study of young people is needed

EDITOR,—James A Heathcote reports a correlation between ear length and age in a sample of adult patients, but can he substantiate his conclusion that "as we get older our ears get bigger"?[1] An alternative (and much more intriguing) interpretation of the findings is that a secular trend towards smaller ears has occurred during most of the present century. Have the senior citizens in the sample had big ears all their adult lives, and will the younger members keep their smaller ones? If so, what environmental factors, presumably operating during childhood or adolescence, might have been responsible? I wonder whether there has been a steady decline in the boxing or scrubbing of children's ears, or whether big ears are simply another result of passive smoking. This interpretative doubt seems to call for extended pinnametric research by Heathcote and his successors: the question can be resolved only by a lifelong follow up study of a cohort of young patients.

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